

What is claimed is:

1. A method for preventing unfair use of software, comprising:

a first step of detecting a feature of a file system of a computer of a particular user and generating characteristic information based on the detected feature;

a second step of causing a licensor of software to generate key data on the basis of the characteristic information generated by said first step, and providing the particular user with the key data;

a third step of detecting a feature of a file system of a particular computer when the software is to be used on said particular computer, and generating characteristic information on the basis of the feature detected by said third step; and

a fourth step of performing an authorization test for determining whether or not to permit use of the software by said particular computer, on the basis of presence/absence of identity or similarity between the characteristic information based on the file system corresponding to the key data and the characteristic information generated by said third step.

2. A method as claimed in claim 1 which further comprises a step of reproducing, from the key data provided to the user, the characteristic information generated by said first step on the basis of the detected feature of

the file system, and

wherein said fourth step compares the characteristic information reproduced from the key data and the characteristic information generated by said third step, and determines whether or not to permit the use of the software on the basis of presence/absence of identity or similarity between the characteristic information compared.

3. A method as claimed in claim 2 wherein said second step converts the characteristic information generated by said first step into the key data in accordance with a predetermined conversion algorithm, and

wherein said step of reproducing reproduces, from the key data, the characteristic information generated by said first step, by reverse execution of the predetermined conversion algorithm.

4. A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the feature of the file system is detected by reading file system information of the computer.

5. A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein said fourth step calculates a difference between the characteristic information based on the file system corresponding to the key data and the characteristic information generated by said third step, and said fourth step determines whether or not to permit the use of the software on the basis of

a calculated level of the difference.

6. A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein said fourth step is executed at least one of time points when the software is installed into the computer, when the software is started to run on the computer and when the software is to be copied on the computer, and the use of the software is inhibited when said fourth step has determined that the use of the software should not be permitted.

7. A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein said fourth step is executed at desired one or more time points during use, by the computer, of the software, and wherein the use of the software is inhibited when said fourth step has determined, at any one of the time points, that the use of the software should not be permitted.

8. A method as claimed in claim 1 which further comprises:

a step of storing the key data provided to the user by said second step; and

a step of updating the key data, stored by said step of storing, so as to match the characteristic information generated by said third step, at least with the provision that said fourth step has determined the use of the software should be permitted.

9. A computer program comprising computer program code

means for performing all the steps of claim 1 when said program is run on a computer.

10. A computer program comprising computer program code means for performing all the steps of claim 7 when said program is run on a computer.

11. A computer program comprising computer program code means for performing all the steps of claim 8 when said program is run on a computer.

12. A computer program for causing a computer to perform a method for preventing unfair use of computer software, said computer program comprising:

    a first step of detecting a feature of a file system of a computer of a particular user and outputting characteristic information based on the detected feature, the characteristic information based on the detected feature being sent to a licensor of the software so that the licensor is allowed to generate key data corresponding to the characteristic information;

    a second step of receiving the key data generated by the licensor;

    a third step of detecting a feature of a file system of a particular computer when the software is to be used on said particular computer, and generating characteristic information on the basis of the detected feature; and

    a fourth step of performing an authorization test for

determining whether or not to permit use of the software by said particular computer, on the basis of presence/absence of identity or similarity between the characteristic information based on the file system corresponding to the key data and the characteristic information generated by said third step.

13. A computer program as claimed in claim 12 which further comprises:

a step of storing the key data received by said second step; and

a step of updating the key data, stored by said step of storing, so as to match the characteristic information generated by said third step, at least with the provision that said fourth step has determined the use of the software should be permitted.

14. A computer program as claimed in claim 12 wherein said first step sends the licensor of the software the characteristic information, outputted by said first step on the basis of the detected feature, via a communication network, and said second step receives the key data, generated by the licensor, via the communication network.

15. A computer program as claimed in claim 12 wherein at least said fourth step is executed at one or more locations within the software, and wherein the use of the software is inhibited when said fourth step has determined,

at any one of the location within the software, that the use of the software should not be permitted.

16. A computer program as claimed in claim 12 wherein said computer program comprises a user registration program and a protection program, said first and second steps are included in said user registration program, and said third and fourth steps are included in said protection program.

17. A computer-readable storage medium containing the computer program as recited in claim 12.

18. An apparatus for preventing unfair use of software, comprising:

first detection means for detecting a feature of a file system of a computer of a particular user and generating characteristic information based on the detected feature;

means for causing a licensor of software to generate key data on the basis of the characteristic information generated by said first detection means, and providing the user with the key data;

second detection means for detecting a feature of a file system of a particular computer when the software is to be used on said particular computer, and generating characteristic information on the basis of the detected feature; and

means for performing an authorization test for

determining whether or not to permit use of the software by said particular computer, on the basis of presence/absence of identity or similarity between the characteristic information based on the file system corresponding to the key data and the characteristic information generated by said second detection means.